



# Parasite Paradise

The push for year-round flea and tick prevention heats up along with the climate.

by Jen Reeder

Milder winters, extreme weather, and increased outbreaks of flea and tick issues in pets are fueling a push for year-round flea and tick prevention. The nonprofit Companion Animal Parasite Council is urging veterinarians to adopt its recommendation of year-round, lifelong flea and tick protection and annual testing for vector-borne diseases.

“The idea is test and protect—every pet, every month, all year long—with flea and tick control,” said Susan Little, DVM, PhD, DACVM (parasitology), Krull-Ewing chair in veterinary parasitology at the Center for Veterinary Health Services at Oklahoma State University, and CAPC board member.

“The recommendation has gained momentum recently because of the recognition—we can’t really deny there’s year-round activity in the last few years because there’s been such intense pressure, intense arthropod infestations.”

Little said studies show geographic expansion of ticks and higher populations of ticks in the areas where, historically, they’ve always been (“Prevalence and geographic distribution of *Dirofilaria immitis*, *Borrelia burgdorferi*, *Ehrlichia canis*, and *Anaplasma phagocytophilum* in dogs in the United States: Results of a national clinic-based serologic survey,” *Veterinary Parasitology*, 2009).

She said practices in areas not known for Lyme disease still require tick protection. There is year-round tick pressure



According to the CDC, incidences of Rocky Mountain spotted fever have increased in the last decade.

from as many as six tick species throughout the United States that can spread other diseases, sometimes potentially fatal.

For example, brown ticks—reservoirs of *R. rickettsii*, which causes Rocky Mountain spotted fever—are found throughout the United States (except Alaska). According to the Centers for Disease Control, incidences of RMSF have increased in the last decade, from less than 2 cases per million people in 2000 to more than 8 cases per million people in 2008.

Additionally, the CDC notes that cases of RMSF were recently reported in an area of eastern Arizona where the disease had never been reported, with more than 90 cases identified in 2009—and proving fatal in 10% of that population.

CAPC provides a free resource at [capcvet.org](http://capcvet.org) that provides local data – by county – on cases of vector-borne disease and updates it monthly.

“There’s not really a tick-free time,” Little said. “And the same goes for fleas. Even though historically flea pressure is lower in the winter months, in any given winter, it can be high and then we get that breach in control.... Last winter in Oklahoma we didn’t have a winter, so we had some flea infestations in February, which is just unheard of.”

She said mild winters as well as weather extremes, such as drought or increased precipitation, support certain populations of blood-feeding arthropods. As a result, she said there aren’t 365 days of pressure, but 12 months.

“I always tell people one reason to do year-round (prevention) is fleas and ticks aren’t going to wait for the calendar month to roll around... they’re going to come out when the opportunity presents itself, and we can’t predict what’s going to happen,” she said. “So we really have to have the pet protected before the fleas and ticks are out.”

She said following a drought in her area, pet owners stopped using control products, and the teaching hospital received numerous dogs so infested with ticks that they had single-digit PCVs and needed multiple blood transfusions.

“It wasn’t tick-borne disease, just sheer numbers of ticks,” Little said.

### **Clients need a nudge**

Chris Carpenter, DVM, MBA, and executive director of CAPC, said clients traveling with pets or even just forgetting to restart flea and tick prevention protocols are other reasons that the organization is touting year-round prevention.

To help veterinarians educate their clients, CAPC provides a free resource at [capcvet.org](http://capcvet.org) that provides local data by county on cases of vector-borne disease. It’s updated monthly.

“Both consumers and veterinarians in some cases would be surprised to see what is in their area and what has been tested,” Carpenter said. “Make the conversation local and timely—it’s more impactful.”

He suggests veterinarians take the local content and write it on a whiteboard in the reception area, changing it each month as the new data is posted.

“That way when someone checks in, it says two things immediately to them: This area just had, let’s say, five new cases; and we’re a practice that’s monitoring it—we’re the local experts.”

Carpenter also encourages veterinarians and practice managers to post the data on their website, blog and/or Facebook page in order to have a strong Internet presence, because so many clients are looking up information online before they set foot in an exam room.

“We cannot let other people speak for the pet,” he said. “The veterinarian is the best person to speak for the pet—end of story.”

Little also suggested posting videos from CAPC’s consumer website ([petsandparasites.org](http://petsandparasites.org)) about parasites, as well as going “old school” and filling a jar at reception with ticks pulled from local pets.

“I do think that creates a visceral response and it motivates people to do things,” Little said.

Pamela Gerds, DVM, and owner of Advanced Care Pet Hospital in Sartell, Minn., said her practice sees fleas and ticks year-round; dogs with ticks arrive in January and February. She posts charts in the exam rooms to show not just the number of cases of Lyme disease in a given year diagnosed at the practice (typically around 35), but the breeds affected.

“That helps because some people think only Labradors or certain breeds of dogs are going to get Lyme disease,” Gerds said. “We’ve definitely made an impact.”

She said an effective way to boost flea prevention is to review brochures with

clients and discuss facts, such as that a flea can lay 40 to 50 eggs a day and can transmit disease and tapeworms.

“You start mentioning tapeworms and people are running to put the medication on their pet,” she said.

She said she has recently seen several cases of Rocky Mountain spotted fever, a disease that wasn’t typically in the area.

“And these were in dogs that never left Minnesota,” Gerds said. “For whatever combination of reasons, things are traveling. Those can be harder to diagnose if you’re not expecting them.”

### Milder winters

Karyn Collier, DVM, and chief medical officer of AAHA-accredited Saint Francis Veterinary Center in Woolwich Township, N.J., said winters in New Jersey have been milder the past few years. She said a few cold days might be followed by a few warmer days, giving the parasites a chance to rise from hibernating in leaves and latch onto a pet. Also, urban areas with microenvironments like paved asphalt that stay warmer than surrounding areas can help fleas survive the winter and infest passing pets.

“So you’re still going to have fleas and some dogs and cats who are at risk of exposure for fleas theoretically in a time when we wouldn’t expect them to be at risk. For that reason, it is certainly worth having that conversation with the pet owner to say, ‘Just because it’s cold outside, the risk has not completely disappeared,’” Collier said.

“You don’t know how to predict how the weather is going to be. So considering keeping that pet on flea and tick prevention year-round may be, as the climate becomes more and more uncertain, the best way to protect your pet from those diseases that they carry and having an infestation of fleas in the house. That’s a conversation that we as veterinarians need to have with pet owners.”

Susan Coe, DVM, ABVP, and co-owner of AAHA-accredited Animal Medical Hospital in Charlotte, N.C., said a key step to



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## Compliance with cat owners presents its own set of challenges, particularly with owners of indoor cats.

compliance is instructing puppy and kitten owners about the importance of flea and tick prevention, and that it is easier and less expensive to prevent problems than to try to “play catch up” once they occur. With owners of older pets, she examines the pets for fleas and ticks and often finds fleas.

“There’s nothing quite as impressive as finding it on their own pet,” Coe said.

She said she’s seen vast improvements in client compliance over the years for the simple fact that products are so much more effective and easy to use, as opposed to 30 years ago when treatment involved flea baths, dips, home foggers and sprays. This makes it easier to promote year-round flea and tick prevention.

“We’ve come a long way in that respect,” she said.

Jules Benson, BVSc, MRCVS, vice president of veterinary services at Petplan pet insurance and veterinarian at Doylestown Animal Medical Clinic in Doylestown, Penn., said he strongly recommends year-round tick and flea prevention to clients because of mild winters and the high prevalence of Lyme disease in his area.

“I usually tell people, ‘Look, with the mild winters we’re having, the ticks can go into summer, autumn and then early

winter, and then by the time it’s warming up again, it’s literally only a month or two later,’” he said. “The risk I always pose is: ‘Are you going to stop this for a month or two and if you’re anything like me, you can forget to start again at the right time?’ It’s really just paying for an extra month or two to make sure you have that constant protection.”

He also recommends the Lyme disease vaccine for pets that spend time frequently outside. When clients say their breeder says vaccines cause cancer and they should be avoided, he discusses the safety of the vaccines and doesn’t use scare tactics, just explains the risks and his recommendations. (CAPC’s Little said CAPC endorses Lyme disease vaccination, and added: “I’ve not seen any data to support problems associated with the vaccines, other than those infrequent reactions that can happen with any vaccine.”)

“We’re still a very trusted profession. I don’t think people think we’re out there trying to sell vaccines,” Benson said.

### Unwanted hitchhikers

Benson said compliance with cat owners presents its own set of challenges, particularly with owners of indoor cats. He said rabies vaccinations can be an effective way to get them in the door, and



then have a discussion about flea and tick control.

“People question why they need (the rabies vaccine) in indoor cats, and the reason I always give is, ‘Bats make great squeaky toys,’” he said.

Fleas can also hitchhike into a home on the backs of other pets, humans or rodents, putting an indoor cat at risk. But convincing cat owners of the need for flea prevention is still an uphill battle, as well as increasing overall compliance, according to Jane Brunt, DVM, owner of AAHA-accredited Cat Hospital at Towson in Baltimore, Md., and executive director of the nonprofit CATalyst Council. For example, pet cats outnumber pet dogs (74.1 million pet cats versus 70 million pet dogs, according to the 2012 AVMA Pet Demographic Sourcebook), but they receive less than half the veterinary care that dogs do (60.5 million veterinary visits for cats versus 130.4 million for dogs).

“We could have weeks of conversation about the causes and implications of that, but the bottom line is we’re underserving them as a profession,” Brunt said.

She said veterinarians can increase cat owner visits and compliance by asking, “Do you have trouble getting your cat in the carrier?” A 2011 CATalyst Council study found that the best-performing practices in increasing compliance asked that question and did even better if they offered some assistance with the problem. To that end, there is a free video, “Cats & Carriers: Friends Not Foes,” on the CATalyst Council’s home page that veterinarians can repost on their websites and share with clients to help them learn ways to acclimate cats to carriers.

Brunt said another way to increase cat owner visits is to ask every dog client if they have cats at home, as 37% of dog owners also own a cat, and open a dialogue about their care.

Once cats are in the door, veterinarians can promote year-round flea and tick prevention by bundling it in a conversation about parasites, including heartworm.



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She said it’s effective to discuss zoonotic implications, particularly if a client has children or elderly people at home, and naturally wants to protect them from potential diseases.

“If you’re passionate about it, and you believe it, then they’ll listen to you,” Brunt said. “Once they’re engaged and understand the need, then that whole parasite conversation is very basic and easy because all you have to do is put this stuff on their shoulders once a month. Done.” ■

Freelance journalist Jen Reeder writes frequently about pet issues from her home office in Durango, Colo.

### For More Information:

Companion Animal Parasite Council:  
[capcvet.org](http://capcvet.org)

CAPC’s consumer website:  
[petsandparasites.org](http://petsandparasites.org)

CATalyst Council’s “Cats & Carriers” video:  
[catalystcouncil.org](http://catalystcouncil.org)

CDC’s geographic distribution of ticks:  
[cdc.gov/ticks/geographic\\_distribution.html](http://cdc.gov/ticks/geographic_distribution.html)

CDC statistics showing increase in incidence of Rocky Mountain spotted fever: [cdc.gov/rmsf/stats/](http://cdc.gov/rmsf/stats/)